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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 002239

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL I2

SUBJECT: IRAQI NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR ON PM'S TRIP TO SYRIA, IRANIAN AND SAUDI INFLUENCE

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Gary Grappo, for reasons 1. 4 b and d.

¶11. (C) Summary: Acting National Security Advisor Dr. Safa al-Sheikh told Pol M/C August 16 that PM Maliki would travel to Damascus August 18 armed with specific intelligence about SARG support for Baathists in Syria, and he would demand that it cease. Al-Sheikh noted that many Iraqi officials continued to view the Baathists as a serious threat in Iraq. Al-Sheikh described perceptions about Iranian influence in Iraq as exaggerated and pointed to greater Saudi influence due to money and control of important satellite media. That media was currently being used to create divisions in Shia political ranks, attack ISCI, and limit the possibility of a united Shia coalition. Regarding Kirkuk, al-Sheikh urged the U.S. military to help in coordination between Iraqi army and Peshmerga forces in the disputed areas. Al-Sheikh said that it would be helpful for the U.S. to publicly re-state its support for Iraq's unity and territorial integrity. End Summary.

Maliki's Trip to Syria

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¶12. (C) Acting Iraqi National Security Advisor Dr. Safa al-Sheikh previewed for Pol M/C August 16 PM Maliki's planned August 18 trip to Damascus. He said that PM Maliki will go to Damascus carrying information that details activities of Iraqi Baathists in Syria, with specific places named, and details of coordination between Syrian military intelligence and the Baathists. The PM will ask for this support to stop and request that certain key people be turned over to the GOI. The GOI would not take at face value Syrian assurances that they will take action, said al-Sheikh. "We have heard it before." The GOI will want to see action.

The Threat Posed by Baathists

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¶13. (C) Al-Sheikh noted that Iraq and the U.S. differ in their assessments of how big a threat the Baathists pose in Iraq. For many Iraqi officials, the threat is perceived as very serious, said al-Sheikh. In the January provincial elections, candidates supported by the Baathists had some success in a few provinces, which may have convinced the Syrians their Baathist card has increased in value. The Syrians are not likely to want to take action against the Baathists unless "a big price is paid," the NS advisor added. He also observed that it will take time to get the Syrians to stop supporting Iraqi Baathists.

Iranian Influence

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¶14. C) When asked by Pol M/C about Iran's influence, al-Sheikh acknowledged it but said there is a degree of exaggeration about Iranian influence in Iraq. The Iranians have influence, primarily because of the polarization inside Iraq, which facilitates this influence. But it will decrease as Iraqi stability increases and the political process matures,

said al-Sheikh.

¶15. (C) Current Iranian policy and influence in Iraq have been "in the refrigerator" for the past few months, given internal developments in Iran. There have been no changes or any boost in their activities in Iraq during this period, reported al-Sheikh. They have some proxies and some influence over certain politicians, but given limits on the popularity of these individuals/parties, and as well as Iran's limited media impact inside, Iran "does not have the upper hand."

Saudi Arabia

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¶16. (C) Al-Sheikh pointed to the Saudis as the neighboring country with the most influence. In addition to money and influence over certain politicians, Saudi influence is connected to their control over key broadcast media such as Qconnected to their control over key broadcast media such as al Arabiya and Al-Sharqiya, as well as other satellite channels and websites, which had a significant impact on individual Iraqis' attitudes. The Saudis are using this media to shape public attitudes by attacking the Iraqi government for rampant corruption and failure to deliver services to the people. This Saudi-controlled media also launches regular attacks on certain political parties, especially ISCI, with a particular focus on exacerbating divisions within Shia political ranks, and making it difficult for a grand Shia coalition to reconstitute itself, al-Sheikh claimed.

¶17. (C) This media message is allowing the Saudis to influence

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politics inside Iraq, especially since ISCI and its potential coalition partners for the Iraqi Alliance have been unable to mount any coherent response to the attacks. When asked if the current Saudi-controlled media message differed from what the Saudis broadcast several years ago, al-Sheikh acknowledged a shift in tone. In the earlier period, the Saudi message had clearly been aimed at undermining and even destabilizing the government, with the glorification of resistance elements. Now the Saudi message seems to communicate that the GOI is here to stay. Instead the Saudis seem to be trying to shape the political process in ways they see to their advantage, said al-Sheikh.

¶18. (C) Al-Sheikh conceded that the attacks on ISCI and the attempts to undermine the prospects for a united Shia coalition could in the end have some positive impact and might even help PM Maliki, especially if he ends up pursuing a cross-sectarian agenda. Under those conditions, the Saudis could even end up favoring Maliki and offering him support, but not openly. The Saudis will be pushing hard - in their media - for a cross-sectarian coalition, he noted. Al-Sheikh warned that a cross-sectarian coalition, while it had advantages, was not a panacea. It could lead to a very weak, fractured government where partners spent their time arguing with each other and are unable to accomplish anything. Given that assessment, Pol M/C noted that al-Sheikh seemed almost optimistic about the trend in relations with Saudi Arabia. Al-Sheikh noted that real improvement was possible but would take some time and added that he supported the idea of "track two" type team, blessed by the GOI but with no official status, traveling to Riyadh to meet with counterparts, as a way to nudge relations forward.

Need to Appoint a Kuwaiti Ambassador

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¶19. (C) Al-Sheikh took on board Pol M/C's point that Iraq should appoint an ambassador to Kuwait as soon as possible, to help resolve key Chapter VII issues, and promised to communicate this to the PM.

Kirkuk

110. (C) The PM is under pressure on the Kirkuk issue, as will any other PM who follows him. The pressure is from Arabs and minorities in Kirkuk and in all the disputed areas. It also comes from Arab nationalists in Baghdad. This pressure cannot be ignored. Kurdish pressure for their interests has gone beyond what even the most tolerant Iraqi can accept, insisted al-Sheikh. One reason ISCI lost big in the provincial elections was the public's perception that it had been far too flexible in its dealing with the Kurds. That perception continues to affect ISCI's popularity. It is important for the U.S. to play a role, for example, helping with coordination between the Iraqi Army and Kurdish Peshmerga forces, said al-Sheikh. This is not only a conflict prevention mechanism but also an important step toward agreement on a provincial council that can offer a political way forward. Putting more authority in local commanders' hands on both sides is not necessarily a good idea. Many of the local Peshmerga commanders have their own agendas, which are different from broader Kurdish interests, al-Sheikh noted, pointing to his own experience working with the Kurds. Al-Sheikh noted in conclusion that it would be helpful for the GOI if USG would publicly restate its position in support of Iraq's unity and territorial integrity. It would help counter the accusations that the U.S. still intends to divide (and occupy) Iraq.

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